

**What vegetable is more than 2,000 years old, is a member of the lily family and was a favorite of King Louis XIV of France?**

**That elegant stalk, Asparagus.**

### **A venerable vegetable**

Asparagus has long been linked to the beginning of spring and new growth. The ancient Egyptians offered it up as a gift to their gods.

Asparagus was a favorite not only of France's King Louis XIV but also of the Roman Emperor Augustus. Early Greeks believed Asparagus could prevent bee stings and stop toothaches, and today its health benefits are still being explored. Fans of Michigan Asparagus may be especially interested in the folklore that propounds Asparagus as an aphrodisiac. It is written that Madame de Pompadour counted Asparagus mixed with egg yolks among her prized aphrodisiacs. Today's Michigan consumers still devour fresh spring Asparagus with unparalleled passion, whatever the reason. Asparagus has no fat or cholesterol. It is low in sodium and calories, and high in fiber. It is rich in vitamins A, B1, B6, C and folic acid. All this makes Asparagus not only elegant and delicious, but healthy as well.

### **Stalking the perfect spear**

Michigan Asparagus spears emerge from the ground with their full stalk diameter; they do not grow fatter with age — unlike some of us. So, look for spears that appear fresh and not dried out. Stalks should be firm, not limp or flabby. Fresh Asparagus snaps immediately. Spears should be fairly straight, with well-formed, tightly closed tips. Keep Asparagus covered and refrigerated until use, preferably within two to three days.

### **Pamper before cooking**

Asparagus should be pampered right up until the moment it is cooked. First, cut only 1/2 an inch off of each stem. Next, wash the stalks in cold water, dry them gently, wrap them carefully so no moisture gets in and then refrigerate them. To extend freshness for more than a few days, place Asparagus stalks upright in a low pan of cold water or wet the ends with a moist paper towel.

Because Asparagus cooks quickly, select stalks similar in size so they cook at the same rate and not become mushy. Asparagus may be cooked in numerous ways. Tie fresh Asparagus spears in manageable bundles, stand them upright in a covered steamer with about 1 1/2 inches of boiling salty water. Or boil spears flat in a large saute pan with about 1 1/2 inches of water. Stalks may also be blanched in advance, kept cool, then sauteed briefly in salt and butter. The cooking time depends on the spears' size and whether you like them crisp, tender or somewhere in between.

Fresh Asparagus can also be stir-fried in oil or butter in a wok for 3 to 5 minutes, or try parboiling spears and then deep-frying them as tempura. You can roast Asparagus in a mixture of oil, salt and pepper, and the peel won't get tough. If you want to magnify the vegetable's flavor, grill or broil unpeeled, uncooked Asparagus. It can also be microwaved, and very tender Asparagus can even be served raw.